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The Virtual Seeker of Sci Fi and Fantasy

 *Awaken Online: Retribution: Side Story* is the third installment of the *Awaken Online* series. The story switches between reality and the virtual realm to create an innovative story that tackles a series of themes that young adults can learn from. At first glance, the story revolves around the virtual world and could be seen as a book to read for pleasure. With the main protagonist’s sudden disappearance, the third book revolves around his female companion and former school mate Riley.

 *Awaken Online: Retribution: Side Story* focuses on a multitude of difficult themes that the previous protagonist faced; this time under a female lead. This strong female protagonist continues this virtual reality Sci-Fi Fantasy medium under the Archetypal Seeker character. Typically, popular in today’s main stream series such as *Harry Potter*, Riley concludes her journey with an obvious end. She is not chasing after the remaining mysteries within the series, but instead embarks on a journey of self-discovery. The author uses Riley for world building while the main series protagonist undergoes his own trials and tribulations.

 One of the major themes that Riley must face throughout her journey include bullying. She faces endless torment at school from her peers; a choice few female classmates nastier than the rest. While in the game, she enacts a strong persona with a huge sense of justice. Speaking out when things are not right, and fighting for things she firmly believes in. When the virtual and reality are juxtaposed beside one another, Riley’s enacts the personality she desires; sadly, only in game. Thanks to the game’s quest, she eventually comes to the conclusion that she must face her bullies head on. Riley’s character and personal development through her in-game experience can be an inspiring story for those who face a similar situation. Afraid to step up and stand for themselves, using games as a virtual conduit for their true persona.

 Similarly, to the Heroes Journey, Riley goes into the woods, and comes out a stronger person. Her resolve is put to the test when she enters the city. In terms of old English literature, this story follows the plot of *Gawain and the Green Knight*. A lesson could be taught that we are just human, we all have our weaknesses and failings, but it does not mean we should simply accept defeat.

 With many young adult novels exploring themes such as bullying, this book can pair well to other stories such as *Speak*. Both books intertwine on the severity of bullying, with an end goal of learning to speak out for yourself. Although *Speak* tackles other serious themes, *Awaken Online* can act as a stepping stone to heavier themed books. Although the world focuses primarily on gaming tropes and systems, *Awaken Online* definitely proves that it can increase awareness to things such as bullying. That gaming is not simply for pleasure, but can lead to personal growth and self-discovery. Blending reality with Sci-Fi Fantasy to incorporate life lessons that are relatable. These Virtual Reality focused books predominantly target young adults who play games. Using role playing game tropes to tackle deeper issues. Virtual reality focused literature can act as a conduit between the world of gaming and literature. Creating a bridge for gamers who are not enthusiastic about literature.

Cline, Ernest. *Ready Player One*. Broadway Books, 2015.

 A dystopian future where all the resources have dwindled. In order to escape their harsh reality, society enters the virtual world known as the OASIS. When the multi-billionaire creator of the virtual prison passes away, his will enacts a tournament to in exchange for wealth beyond the dystopian imagination. A race to solve a series of difficult puzzles, all while an evil corporation attempts to undermine its competition with deadly force.

 Ernest Cline borrows the elements of digital gaming and culture to weave a story about friendship and troubling passion in a dystopian future. By adding a plethora of nostalgic gaming lore to ease the stories tension, it juxtaposes well beside the dystopian future that can only dream of the glory days.

CHMILENKO, LUKE. *ASCEND ONLINE*. Ætherworld Productions, 2016.

 A story focused intensely on the game, adventures enter a hyper realistic evolving virtual reality. Although the reality they play in is just a game, morality is questioned when a quest asks players to slave other players. Typically a good versus evil plot, there is a focus on the morality of humans in a world where standard law is not present.

 Luke Chmilenko crafts a story focused on the typical good versus evil, friendship and morality. He questions the morality of players within a closed space, asking the reader if it is okay to commit atrocious acts for millions of dollars. Chmilenko sheds light on the moral dilemmas that can be associated to history.

Card, Orson Scott. *Ender's Game*. Tor Teen, 2014.

 A story in the not so distant future, where man-kind fears an alien race that is beyond their communication and understanding. Their answer is to raise child prodigy that can lead their armies against the Bugger menace. The journey is focused on Ender Wiggins, a child soldier born to conduct mass genocide.

 Orson Scott Card tackles a couple of issues such as military conduct, genocide, and the horrific difference between reality and games. He masterfully incorporates “games” as hurdles for Ender to cross and develop his character. Coupling childlike games with military culture to create a awe inspiring story of a boy forced to face his fate head-on; whether he wants to or not.

Yap, Cosimo. “Opening Moves (The Gam3 Book 1) EBook: Cosimo Yap, Aimee Hale: Kindle Store.” *Amazon.com: Opening Moves (The Gam3 Book 1) EBook: Cosimo Yap, Aimee Hale: Kindle Store*, 24 Mar. 2016, www.amazon.com/Opening-Moves-Gam3-Book-1-ebook/dp/B01DFCNAPG.

A multitude of alien civilizations invite mankind to participate in The Game; a method to end all wars through virtual reality proxy battles and government. The Enforcers enact supreme judgement based on the results of the Game, ending all real life conflict; resistance leading to a swift end from superior technology. Alan must traverse the world and find his own calling, while the fate of Earth is thrusted from human control.

 Cosimo Yap crafts a wonderful story about determination and in an unsure world. By mixing a universe wide game with governmental war/conflicts to create awareness on the subject of war. Comparing an endless war in reality to an endless war in game. His combination of themes focuses on an individual’s overall imprint on the world.

Castle, Edward. *Unbound Deathlord: Challenge*. Castle, 2016

 Virtual reality becomes so real that people transport themselves to worlds of fantasy and adventure. Fleeing from his past, Jack Thorn enters the virtual world of Valia Online. With a mixture of creativity and dumb luck, Jack takes on a world that seems purely against his anti-hero persona.

 Edward Castle’s story focuses on understanding, grief, and family. Where the protagonist despises everything that his parents stood for, he slowly comes to realize that his parents had trained him to grasp whatever he desires. The story is about fighting or accepting fate, that you can create forge your own path. The lives your parents lead, can merely be a blueprint of do’s and don’ts.

Wells, Dan. *Bluescreen: a Mirador Novel*. Balzer Bray, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2017.

A Sci-Fi Noire novel where technology has become like oxygen, necessary to life, and choking without it. Marisa Carneseca’s carefree life comes to an end when a digital drug infects her friend, turning her into a puppet against her will. It is a race against the clock for Marisa to save her friend and possibly the world.

 Dan Wells’s story takes place in the distant future, where technology reigns supreme and jobs are scarce. His story emphasizes on the importance of family, friendship, and that too much technology can be a bad thing. This cyber noire is meant to empower young woman, encourage healthy technology use, and increase the awareness of different kinds of substance abuse.

Brody, Edward. *Eden's Gate: The Reborn*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

 Eden’s Gate, a new virtual reality game launches with millions of users playing; until the creator activates a protocol that kills all the active users and closes all communication between the real world and the game. Gunnar Long, one of the users is now trapped within the virtual world and he does not know if his girlfriend is trapped in there with him. When hundreds of thousands of people continue to use the machine to commit ritual suicide into the virtual realm, the government decides to shut down the game. This causes a chain of events that force Gunnar Long to cooperate with one of the lead programmers in a last-ditch effort to preserve their existence.

 The predominant themes in this story are few, focusing on suicide, death, and the power of choice. Although the users in the virtual prison did not have a choice to enter the game permanently, the protagonist is faced with many scenarios that cause major changes to his virtual environment. There are some moral dilemmas such as the right to commit suicide and how a small choice can damage relationships.

Jyumonji, Ao. *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*. Seven Seas Entertainment, LLC, 2017.

 A bunch of kids and adults are transported to a fantastical world, their memories missing. The strong leave the weak behind, and the remaining members barely scrape by. Driven by their will to survive, the group of weaklings set out together in hopes of making ends meet.

 A Japanese light novel that focuses on the fantasy world with no knowledgeable method to escape from. The first book deals with a death and the bonds of friendship. Although the story does not exist in the virtual realm there are role playing game mechanics blend with reality. Filled with typical video game tropes to lure the curious young adult gamer. *(Still reading)*

Bagwell, Travis. *Awaken Online Book 1: Catharsis*. Travis Bagwell, 2016.

 Jason’s reality sucks so badly, he needs something to take his mind off the horrendous daily high school grind. A new virtual reality game promises the most realistic experience one could imagine. Through his second life in the game, he attempts to attain the power that his reality lacks.

 Travis Bagwell combines virtual reality gaming with high school problems seamlessly. The story switches from both planes of existence to display Jason’s character growth in the game compared to his reality. Through his interactions in the game he learns how to deal with bullies while taking control of the reins of his life. An excellent story about growing up and taking control.

Bagwell, Travis. *Awaken Online Side Quest: Retribution.* CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017

 Riley continues her journey in the Awaken Online to escape from her powerless and bullied real-life existence. With her frustrations mounting, she goes on an adventure to complete a quest. Through her in game quest, she slowly learns that you need to stand up for yourself.

 Travis Bagwell’s third book in the *Awaken Online* series that focuses on the female protagonist of the series. Bagwell incorporates the game to facilitate Riley’s growths as she discovers more about herself. Blending both the game and reality results in a Sci-Fi fantasy focused on bullying, coping, and self-discovery.